

Chapter VIII

Return of the Mission

Father Coleman was a kind and well-regarded pastor. His compassion and concern for his flock is illustrated by the following story.

The Birkle family moved from the city to St. Philomena parish in 1946, part of the aforementioned migration. It was a large family, with seven children, later to number thirteen, for whom the appeal of open space in a rural environment was strong. The following January, the Birkle house burned to the ground. There were, fortunately, no casualties, but everything else was lost.

Father Coleman took swift and effective charge of the shocked and bewildered family. As told by Rose Birkle Seibert, "First he prevailed on a neighbor, who had a tenant house on his farm, to let us use it until we could find a home. It was being used as a hen house, so we scrubbed all the walls and moved in. He had notified Holy Trinity (Batavia) and St. Andrew's (Milford) that we needed help. And I can still see one room stacked with boxes filled with clothes. He then collected furniture for us."

"Next, he went to the Red Cross. They made sure we each had one new outfit of clothes, a new coat, and a new pair of shoes. And then, he guided Mom to the services we needed till we got back on our feet. We were much indebted to him."

Father Coleman enlisted the aid of the nuns at Our Lady of Mercy Hospital in Mariemont to teach Catechism classes. He promised transportation for the good sisters, and for many of the children as well. Mrs. Seibert recalled that, "When it was time to take them back, the car was filled to the brim. Some of us would sit on the sisters' laps and would head for Mariemont, and he would drop us off on the way back. We all enjoyed that ride."

When motorized transport was not available, the parish children walked to classes, some from considerable distance. Mothers would pack lunches for the long trek. One former student remembers "bologna and mayonnaise sandwiches. The sun would give them a taste I have never duplicated." Not difficult to imagine!

In 1952, Father Coleman determined that the Batavia parish, Holy Trinity, was growing so rapidly that it would be more efficient for him to reside there. Thus, 113 years after its founding, St. Philomena parish was, once again, a mission, if only in the sense that its pastor was not resident.

In the late 1940's, another landmark disappeared. The covered bridge over Stonelick Creek, at the church, its timbers rotten on the south end, was replaced by a steel truss bridge, still in service today. The steel bridge was, however, not new either, having been moved from another location. And so, the covered bridge, about 1/4 mile west of the church, was left as the only surviving one of its kind in Stonelick Township, and has become the township's unofficial trademark.



The interior of St. Philomena Church, around 1960.

In 1954, Father Coleman was reassigned and was replaced by Father Zimmer. Father Zimmer's service was but three years, and he was replaced in 1957 by Father Scanlon, who served until 1963.

In 1963, Father Coghlan assumed pastorship. An enthusiastic boater, the parishioners at Holy Trinity were a bit surprised to find the parish parking lot had become home port to the pastor's boat and trailer. Servers of both parishes were treated to outings on Father Coghlan's craft throughout his tenure, in appreciation of their services.

In 1967, Father Coghlan was succeeded by outspoken Father Buerger. Not one to mince words, "Father Frank" soon enjoyed quite a reputation for "callin' 'em as he saw 'em."

The decade of the 1960's saw unparalleled upheaval in Catholicism as a whole. The Second Vatican Council, 1962 - 1965, resulted in sweeping changes in the liturgy, in parish organization, in customs and practices. Lenten and Eucharistic fasts were greatly liberalized. Latin was abolished as the language of worship. Parish Councils were strongly empowered. Lectors shared the scriptures with priests. Laypersons distributed Holy Communion. Altars were, literally, turned around. It seemed as if the traditionally demanding practices of Catholicism had been "wimped-out and watered down."

At highly traditional St. Philomena, the impact of Vatican II was wrenching. The handcrafted, gothic, white wooden altar was summarily removed and replaced with what seemed an austere, steel-legged table. The statue of St. Philomena, originally donated by John Barnickle, who had made his First Communion in the parish in 1877, was removed to the sacristy. Parishioners recruited as lectors read self-consciously from the Old Testament and the Epistles. The choir and the congregation wrestled with modern hymns, written by composers who emphasized social, rather than theological, themes. The world seemed upside down.

And yet, St. Philomena parish rode out the tempest of change relatively undamaged. It accepted the dictates of the Council, grudgingly at first, then finally incorporating them into the fabric of ongoing parish life. Still, compared to other parishes, St. Philomena's congregation retains a very strong traditional orientation, based upon a simple and homey precept: "If it ain't broke, don't fix it!"

Father Buerger was succeeded in 1971 by Father Frommeyer, a spirited and flamboyant pastor who served but one year.

In the 1960's and into the 1970's, seminarians from the Novitiate at Milford taught Catechism classes, known by then as "CCD" classes. The Confraternity of Christian Doctrine was established in order to unify religious instruction for Catholic children not having access to parochial schools.